



ELSAH HISTORY

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NO. 51, 1987

WHERE DID ELSAH GET ITS NAME?

The earliest map of southern Jersey County shows the name "Elsa" for our town, and only in the later 1860's do we find regular mention of the village with its present spelling. In an article in the Transactions of the Illinois State Historical Society for the year 1905 Mrs. Mary Semple Ames Cushman concludes that her ancestors had lived in Scotland "near

the little town of Ailsea." (p. 62) So far we have not been able to locate this spot in the section of Scotland where the ancestors of her grandfather James Semple lived. She contends that he named Elsay after the town where his family had lived, but in a study of her sister's copy of the Genealogical History of the Family Semple, (p. 8), the only site men-

tioned is Castle Semple and another named Elliestoun. So where can we turn for the origin of Elsay? The most logical choice seems to be a famous rock in the Firth of Clyde known as Ailsa Craig. It stands out on the horizon from the shore as one drives south from Ayr, an area that must have been familiar to the first generations of Semples who lived in Scotland. There is no question that James Semple instilled in his daughters a reverence for their Scottish ancestry, and so they must be permitted a little poetic license in telling the story of the village. This past year Mr. Leslie Greenhill came to a summer session at Principia College and informed your editor that in 1948 he and his wife had spent several days on Ailsa Craig watching the stonecutting operation that made the rock famous. He had prepared an article for publication at that time, but it has remained in manuscript for nearly forty years. We present this story without any changes so that the reader can feel the excitement of visiting Ailsa Craig when it was an active industrial site. Today there are no more quarrying operations, but through Leslie Greenhill's eyes we can gain some understanding of the magic qualities of the rock that gave Elsay its name.



A look at Ailsa Craig from the deck of "The Lady Ailsa." On board are rough-hewn curling stones being shipped to the Scottish mainland for shaping and polishing.

AILSA CRAIG SCOTTISH ISLE WITH A UNIQUE INDUSTRY

by Leslie P. and Elizabeth F. Greenhill

Hearken, thou craggy ocean pyramid!

Give answer from thy voice, the sea-fowls' screams!

When were thy shoulders mantled in huge streams?

When from the sun was thy broad forehead hid?

How long is't since the mighty power bid

Thee heave to airy sleep from fathoms deep?

These lines are from the sonnet "To Ailsa Rock" written in the year 1818 by the English poet, John Keats, while he was on a walking tour with friends in Ayrshire, Scotland. It is recorded that the party stayed overnight in the town of Girvan, where, from the mainland, Ailsa Rock appeared like a giant tortoise lying asleep on the calm waters!

Not always, though, does Ailsa Craig appear to be dreaming peacefully on calm waters. Last August as we stood on the waterfront at Girvan a very different scene confronted us. Ten miles of turbulent Clyde Water stretched between us and the elusive little island, which was at times visible and at times hidden by misty rain and fog. We settled down to wait in Girvan until the skipper of "The Lady Ailsa" would make a crossing to the island on his regular mail run, but it was three days before we received word that the 56 foot motor launch would set out for Ailsa Craig that day.

After a rough crossing lasting about an hour we drew alongside the little jetty on the leeward side of the island. Above us the towering granite cliffs of the island rose 1114 feet to the summit. It is from these granite cliffs that the island's unique industry is derived - for here are located the quarries which have now been worked by three generations of the Girvan family to produce practically the world's supply of curling stones. (The game of Curling is played rather like the English games of bowls, but on an ice rink using highly polished circular granite stones, which are roughly 50 lbs in weight.) In Scotland, Canada, U.S.A., Sweden, Switzerland, China, Australia - in fact wherever "The Roarin' Game" is played, curling stones quarried on Ailsa Craig are highly prized. Our object in visiting the island was to study and photograph this unique one-man industry.

All the islanders were there to meet the boat - Mr. Jimmy Girvan the tenant of the island and proprietor of



The granite cliffs on the west side of the island rise to a height of 900 feet. Many variety of sea birds nest here in the thousands.

the curling stone quarries, Mrs. Girvan his friendly Scottish wife who made us so welcome, four people from the lighthouse settlement, and a young lad who was helping Mr. Girvan load the curling stones at the quarry. This was the entire population of Ailsa Craig! After being welcomed by Mr. and Mrs. Girvan we made our way to a small granite cottage which they had put at our disposal, and settled down quickly to island life. We spent the next few days looking over the curling stone quarries and exploring the island.

The Curling Stone Industry.

The present quarry where Jimmy Girvan works each day of the summer months (April to September) is about three quarters of a mile from the jetty and lighthouse settlement. Until last year the quarried stones had been

transported to the jetty by means of a rowing boat, but this method was not very satisfactory in the rough surf around the island, and many cargoes had been lost. Last summer Jimmy Girvan set to work to lay a light rail track along the base of the cliffs from the quarry to the jetty, and "Neddy" the donkey was acquired to do the hauling. The present system works splendidly and Neddy seems to sense the responsibility of his job.

Jimmy Girvan in his familiar black beret is a braw Scot with a grand sense of humour and taste for literature.

Exploring the Island.

On the first fine, sunny day, we decided to climb to the summit of the island. We took the steep track edging up the cliff face behind Granite Cottage and scrambled up to the ruins of an ancient castle about 400 feet above sea level. The island is now owned by the Marquis of Ailsa but in former days it belonged to the Abbey of Crossraguel, and the castle probably dates from that period. The walls and floors of the remaining tower are still intact, but the upper section of the spiral stone stairway has crumbled with the centuries.

Above the castle the path grew even steeper, and a few wild sheep and rabbits scattered as we climbed into their seldom visited terrain. Sheep had been brought over from the mainland many years ago for food, but had gradually become wild through grazing on the steep slopes and rugged cliffs of the island, and they now move with the timidity and alacrity of mountain goats. Rabbits too had been a one-time industry, but are now a chance shot for Jimmy Girvan's or the lighthouse keepers' rifles.

Not far below the actual summit we found the tiny Garra Loch. This is really a bog, fed by a natural spring and composed almost entirely of pure sphagnum moss. The moss was a vivid green, and soft and spongy to tread on, and we worked our arms down as far as the shoulder to try to determine the depth of the growth. Later, Jimmy Girvan told us that they had measured it to a depth of 17 feet and still had not struck bottom!

Above Garra Loch there is a short climb to the summit, and from the rock cairn at the top, 1114 feet above sea level, the view was magnificent. We would look east to the Scottish mainland at Girvan, north up the Clyde towards the mountains of Arran, west towards the Mull of Kintyre, while to the south lay the Irish Sea.

From this point we explored the western and southern cliff tops which are 700 feet high in some places and are composed of basaltic columns. Here are the nesting grounds of the wild sea birds - the puffin, cormorant, kittiwake, guillemot, stormy petrel (seen occasionally in

rough weather) and, most important of all, the gannet or Solan Goose (*Sula Bassana*). On Ailsa Craig is one of the principal gannet colonies of the world. It is estimated that over 6000 pairs nest there every year. We perched, fascinated, on the cliff edge about 500 feet above the sea and watched the antics of the birds in their nests.

In the period lasting about two hours between the ebb and flood tides we were able to walk right around the island (a distance of about two and a half miles) on the shore platform at the base of the tremendous cliffs, the highest of which is the 700 foot Barestack. This provided an opportunity for exploring the caves - Swine Cave on the North point and Water Cave and Macanall's Cave on the Western side of the island. The latter has some exciting smugglers' stories connected with it.

It is interesting to note that there are no trees on Ailsa Craig. The main vegetation is grass, bracken and heather, and while we were there Mr. Jimmy Girvan managed to find us a bunch of the rare white heather to take home with us. Probably the only indigenous inhabitant of the

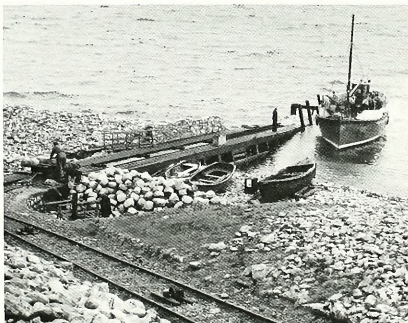
"Neddy," the donkey, pictured with the light truck line used to carry the quarried "stones" to the jetty for shipment to the mainland. The photo at right shows a pile of quarried stones (90 lbs each), awaiting placement on the "Lady Ailsa."



island is the slow worm which is about 15 inches long and looks like a small adder. It is quite harmless and feeds on insects.

Goodbye to the Craig.

When the time came for us to return to the mainland, the weather again played tricks, this time keeping us marooned on the island! But at last we received a message, broadcast to the Lighthouse, that "The Lady Ailsa" was on her way. For some time Jimmy Girvan had been building up a pile of curling stones awaiting favorable conditions for shipping them to the mainland, and when "The Lady Ailsa" finally arrived there was feverish activity in order to get the stones aboard before the weather deteriorated again. Jimmy Girvan and his young assistant lifted the 90 lb stones from the pile beside the jetty on to a small truck which was then run down alongside "The Lady Ailsa". Here "the men from Mauchline" inspected them and stowed them on board. In just under two hours three hundred stones had been loaded, and as it had commenced to rain and a stiff breeze was springing up, the skipper was anxious to get back to the mainland. So we loaded our own gear aboard

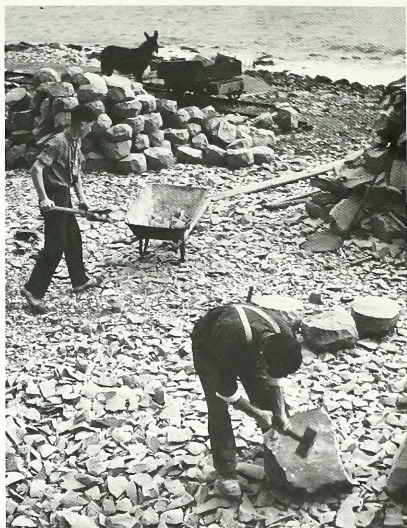


and waved our goodbyes and thanks to the Girvans and Lighthouse people who had made our visit so interesting and enjoyable.

As the ten miles of sea stretched out in the wake of "The Lady Ailsa" a cloud settled down again on the summit of the island and the Clyde mists swirled around it!

E. F. AND L. P. GREENHILL.

Photographs by Leslie P. Greenhill



Above: Mr. Jimmy Girvan at work on one of the 2400 stones he quarries per season. Below: Ruin of ancient castle 400' above sea level en route to the summit of Ailsa Craig.



EARLY HISTORY

A member of Historic Elsay foundation recently made available to us a copy of the Early History of the State of Illinois for 1878. It was written and compiled by J. A. Matthews and published in St. Louis by the Missouri Publishing Company. This is probably the first history of the village in print, and many of the events described had occurred within the previous twenty-five years. The reader may note that a number of the commercial establishments described here were in buildings that still survive. Mrs. Olga Hoey occupies the Stephany store, and the old Union Hotel was the Drexilious property. We also have included some biographical sketches from the tax list for 1878. In this case the citizens chose to pay for the inclusion of a brief sketch -- and they supplied the information. We urge you to read this account and the tax list with the realization that you are getting a picture of Elsay 110 years ago.

ELSAH OR JERSEY LANDING.

The land, on which is now situated the town of Jersey Landing, was entered by James Mason, and afterwards came into the possession of William H. Allen, of Grafton, who disposed of it to James Semple, formerly United States senator and minister to Bogota. Semple subsequently laid out the town of Jersey Landing, which was surveyed on the 7th of March, 1853. He opened a road up Askew Hollow, so called from Joshua T. Askew, who had an extensive sugarcamp in the hollow about half a mile distant from the river. Shortly after the laying-out of the town a landing was established and called Jersey Landing. On the establishment of the post office it was called Elsay, which name it has still retained, though the town has been popularly known as Jersey Landing. The first postmaster was James Semple.

The first store opened was by John H. Onetto and Joseph Brock, in the month of October, 1852. This store was kept in a stone building which still stands on the bank of the river. Before the opening of the store a frame house was built by John Giberson; this now stands next to Mr. Onetto's present store. John H. Onetto was born in Philadelphia; his father was a ship carpenter by trade, and Mr. Onetto, on coming to St. Louis in 1836, worked on the first steamboat ever built in that city; he began keeping a store on the Illinois river about a mile above its mouth in 1850; he has been in the mercantile business ever since coming to Jersey Landing, of which town he is now the oldest resident. The second business man to move into Jersey Landing was Martin Stephany who also opened a store and has been engaged in selling goods

from that time to the present. W. G. Onetto, in 1853, established a blacksmith shop. The first marriage in the town was that of Joseph Brock to Margareta Onetto, in 1853. The first birth was in 1853, that of John B. Reintges, son of Peter Reintges. Judge Semple, in honor of the event, presented the infant with a town lot.

In the year 1858 the Jersey Landing mill and distillery was built by Knapp, Goodrich & Co., of Jerseyville. It stood on the bank of the river, about one hundred yards above the mouth of the hollow, and consisted of a large stone building forty feet in width, and the mill and distillery together two hundred feet in length, the distillery being two stories in height, and the mill three and a half. Its cost was sixty five thousand dollars. From the date of the erection of this mill and distillery, the town began to improve and expand. The mill was in operation till May 5th, 1870, when it was completely destroyed by fire.

Before the construction of the railroads a large business was done at Jersey Landing in the shipment of grain. It is said that for a period extending from 1853 to 1856, it was one of the largest shipping points for grain along the Mississippi. Messrs. Onetto and Brock acted as shippers. During the grain season in the years noted above, Mr. Onetto states that the firm never received less than five hundred bushels per day, principally corn, and from this the amount ranged up to three thousand. It was no unusual thing for the town to be completely blocked up with wagons waiting to unload, and frequently the line of wagons would extend a mile back from the river. There was no building in which to store it, the levee was usually piled full of sacks of corn, and in the year 1853 the tarpaulin hire alone amounted to more than five hundred dollars. The grain was principally bought and shipped by parties in Edwardsville, for whom Onetto and Brock acted as agents. This large trade in grain made the business of selling goods brisk during this period, and it was no uncommon circumstance for the sales of Onetto and Brock to amount to five hundred dollars per day, a heavy business in those times.

The town of Jersey Landing is built mostly in a hollow and extends back in the neighborhood of a mile from the river. The houses are mostly substantially built of brick or stone, and are of a better class than is usual in towns of its size. The population is about five hundred. The business establishments are as follows:

General stores: John H. Onetto, Martin Stephany, J. N. Giberson & Bros., Christian Drexcelious.

Drug store: Benjamin L. Mott.

Warehouse and commission merchant: F. F. Hansell.

There are in addition two blacksmith shops, wheel-

right, shoemaker, while some minor business interests are represented. There are two physicians, Dr. B. F. Farley and Dr. George Sumrall. B. L. Mott and D. T. Tonkinson dispense justice, having been invested by their fellow citizens with the authority of justices of the peace. In the school, which occupies a neat and substantial stone building, two teachers are employed. The spring of 1878, L. Y. Adams and William Blyler removed their mill from East Newbern to this place where it is now in operation. A regular packet furnishes daily communication with St. Louis. A ferry has recently been established to communicate with St. Charles County, Missouri. An excellent road leading up the hollow connects the town with the country on the bluffs, which is justly claimed to be the best wheat growing region in the world, its product bringing a price considerably higher per bushel in the market. The Methodist Episcopal church has a neat building erected in 1875.

Elsah Lodge, No. 269, I. O. O. F., was organized February 19th, 1859, and has since had an active and prosperous existence. The lodge owns a large brick storehouse, the largest building in the town, the dimensions of which are seventy by forty feet; part of the upper story is occupied as an Odd Fellows' Hall, and the remainder is used as a hall for general purposes. The lodge has besides twelve hundred dollars at interest, and is in a better pecuniary condition than most benevolent orders.

A magnificent view is offered from the bluffs adjoining the town, which are here about three hundred feet in height. Just below the town is "Notch Cliff," the residence of Mrs. Ames, the daughter of James Semple, from which a charming and extensive prospect of romantic scenery can be obtained.

1878 BIOGRAPHIES

Byler, Wm. H., miller. Elsah, was born in Philadelphia, Penn., Sep. 2d, 1844; he came to this county in 1868; is a Democrat in politics and liberal in religion; in 1862 he enlisted in the U.S. navy at Philadelphia, and was honorably discharged at Boston in July, 1865; he married Miss Rebecca McAdams, of this county, Feb. 26th, 1871; she died Dec. 18th, 1878; he is the father of one son, W.E., six years of age.

Farley, B. F., homeopathic physician, Elsah, was born in Carrollton, Green county, Ill., June 3d, 1832; cosmopolitan in religion and politics; he served as recruiting officer one year, and in the army, nine months; was married Nov. 26th, 1855, to N. Elizabeth McHenry, of Petersburg, Menard county, Ill.; is the father of five children—four boys and one girl, three boys living.

Fuller, E. M., farmer. Elsah, was born Feb. 22d, 1817, in Bennington, Vermont; came to this county May, 1859; politics Democratic; religion neutral; owns 320 acres of land, valued at \$25,000; served

three months in the army and was honorably discharged; he was married in 1837 to Miss Rhoda Dolley, and is the father of five children, four of whom are living; she died in 1852; in May, 1854; he married Miss Maria Boyington, by whom he had six children, five of whom are living.

Hansell, Thos. F., commission merchant, Elsah, son of F. H. Hansell of England, was born in Dearborn county, Indiana, Dec. 31st, 1835. He came to this county in 1869; is a Republican, and a member of the M. E. church. Married Miss Mary J. Hansell, Feb. 1859; is the father of four children, all of whom are dead.

Keller, Cosmos, saloon keeper, Elsah, was born in Alsace, Gamsheim, France, March 11th, 1832; came to this county March, 1857. He is neutral in politics, and believes in Catholicism, but not a member of any church. In 1856, he married Doretha Behrens; she died in Jan., 1877. Married Mrs. Bertha Feuerherd, July of the same year. Is the father of three children, two of whom are living: Cosmos aged 19, and Emma aged 15 years.

Kesler, Jacob, farmer. Elsah, was born Sept. 10th, 1841, in Hamilton county, Ohio, and came to this county March, 1873. Politics, Republican; religion, Presbyterian; owns 120 acres of land, valued at \$6000. He enlisted in Co. K., 33d Missouri, Aug., 1862, and was honorably discharged Aug., 1865. Married Miss Rebecca Hansell Feb., 1872; is the father of one son, Clifford, aged three months.

Lock, John, farmer, section 26, town 6, range 11. Elsah, was born in Devonshire, England, April 18th, 1816. He came to Illinois in 1839, and to this county in 1865; is a Republican, and a member of the Episcopal church; owns 850 acres of land, valued at \$25,000. He married Elizabeth Challacomb, of Macoupin county, in 1847; is the father of nine children, three of whom are boys.

Loehr, Christian, saloon keeper, Elsah, was born April 14th, 1832, in Baddeckenstedt, Hanover, Germany; came to this county in 1857. Neutral in politics, and member of the Lutheran church. He married Christine Schrier, Sept., 1861; she died Jan., 1864. In May, 1864, he married Mrs. Eva M. Reintges, a widow with four children, viz: John B., Louisa A. E., Theresa M. and Jacob C. He is the father of five children, two boys by his first wife, and two boys and a girl by his second. All are dead except the girl, Lizzie, aged 7 years.

Marshaw, Wm., farmer, section 8, township 6, range 11. Elsah, was born in this county June 26th, 1827; he is Republican in politics, and a member of the Cumberland Presbyterian church; owns 120 acres of land, valued at \$5,400; he enlisted in Co. C, 154th Reg. Ill. Vol. Inf., Feb. 14th, 1865; and was mustered out May 23d, 1865; has served as school director of his district for nine years; he married Margaret E. McDow, Nov. 23d, 1828; by this union there have been ten children born, all of whom are dead except four.

Slaten, B. F., farmer and attorney, residence section 6, township 6, range 11. Elsah, was born in St. Clair county, Ill., Feb. 20th, 1820; he came to what is now this county in 1829; is a Democrat; endorses the doctrines of the M. E. church, but is not a member of any religious organization; owns 182 acres of land, valued at \$6,500; he was during the late war captain of Co. K, 97th Reg. Ill. Vol. Inf., from July 25, 1862, to Feb. 3d, 1865, when he was discharged by his own request; in 1872 he was elected State's attorney of this county, which position he held one term; he married Miss Maria Askew, June 22d, 1845; she was born March 14th, 1826; by this union nine children were born, six of whom are living—five in this county and one in Missouri.

Starr, James E., farmer, residence Eminence, P. O. Elsah; born Sep. 21st, 1813, in New York City; came to this county May 15th, 1862; is a Democrat in politics; he married Sabra E. Ellis, Oct. 8th, 1846.